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RATIONALIST PRESS ASSOCIATION

# The Rationalist Press Association Limited

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# OBJECTS OF THE RPA

**To encourage a rational approach to human problems**

**To provide a constructive alternative to the religious view of life**

**To promote the use of science for human welfare**

**To defend freedom of thought and civil liberties**

**To publish books, pamphlets and periodicals and to sponsor conferences and campaigns to further these aims and all they entail**

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# What the RPA does today

Books

THE RPA PUBLISHES books and pamphlets under its own imprint and through its subsidiary, Pemberton Books. Many of these are also published in the United States under a reciprocal arrangement with Prometheus Books. The range of interests to which the publications appeal is limited only by the objects for which the RPA was founded. That policy has always been to enable the intelligent layman to enjoy the fruits of scholarship in works of popularization, but not vulgarization.

Members' Editions

MEMBERS OF THE RPA are entitled to buy selected books through the Association at a substantial discount, very often as soon as the books are published. Both specialist studies and works of a more general interest are available. A current list is available and new members' editions are announced from time to time in *New Humanist* and other journals.

Periodicals

ALL MEMBERS RECEIVE on account of their subscription two periodicals: *New Humanist* and *Question.*

*New Humanist,* edited by Christopher Macy, is an illustrated monthly magazine containing articles on current issues, book reviews and comment on matters of urgent social concern. Pungent and polemical, *New Humanist* has won the respect of its adversaries as the voice of the Rationalist and Humanist movement.

*Question;* Founded in 1884 as *The Agnostic Annual,* then becoming *The Rationalist Annual* until 1968, *Question* continued to be a forum for high level

discussion. The title was changed to suggest the search rather than the answer as nothing is taken for granted, everything is in question. Pros and cons on all issues except party politics are presented for the reader to judge.

The Editorial Advisory Board includes Professor A J Ayer, Theodore Besterman, Rupert Crawshay Williams, Professor David Daiches, Professor C D Darlington, H Lionel Elvin, Professor Antony Flew, J S L Gilmour, Professor P N Nowell Smith, Dr D J Stewart, The Baroness Wootton.

### The Journal of Moral Education

Editor, Derek Wright, University of Leicester; Associate Editor, Professor Lawrence Kohlberg, Harvard University; Review Editor, William Kay, Nottingham College of Education; Consultant Editor, Dr D J Stewart, Brunel University.

The Journal of Moral Education is supported by funds from the RPA, but is published independently by Pemberton Publishing Company and has its own editorial board. Its aim is to establish links between research workers in various fields of social science, philosophers of education, educationalists and teachers. The journal occupies a unique position in education, and is published three times a year. Subscription details are available from the publishers.

### Conferences

A weekend conference at one of the universities is held every summer to study in depth the implications of being a Rationalist. Members of the RPA can attend at reduced terms.

### Summer Schools

Summer Schools and Regional Conferences are held in collaboration with the British Humanist Association in widely separated parts of the country.

### Campaigns

Throughout its long career the RPA has taken up the cause of civil liberties and intellectual freedom. It has consistently attacked all restrictions derived from theological premises and sought to bring laws dealing with marriage, divorce, birth control and abortion in harmony with modern feeling. The RPA has financed social surveys and organised public meetings to this end.

# WHAT IS THE RPA?

The Rationalist Press Association is an association of members united in the common purpose of upholding reason and presenting the case for Rationalism. Its message is that civilisation is a thin precarious crust built over savagery by reason. The horrors of two world wars and persecutions before and since are proof, if any is needed, of the price to be paid for giving rein to the forces of unreason.

Unlike most religions and ideologies, Rationalism is not a set of beliefs. It is a technique for testing beliefs and deciding whether or not they are sound. The most impressive example of Rationalism in practice is science.

Rationalists accept the findings of science as the most likely account of the world we live in and of our own nature. It is not the last word. Every new advance in knowledge will modify the pattern. But the success of this systematic application of reason to our problems is in striking contrast to the failure of other types of approach, such as 'thinking with the blood'.

We are not so naive as to suppose that all human problems can be solved even in principle by science. We know today that technology can be abused and that knowledge is two-edged. It has led, for example, to the ability to blow up the whole world and bring human history to a stop. That - and many lesser disasters - can only be avoided by the constant application of careful reason in human affairs. That is why a spread of rational thinking is needed.

## Living with Reality

What is meant by thinking rationally? Nothing necessarily abstruse. In law courts a jury may be invited to consider what an ordinary reasonable man might do. We may not be able to define 'reasonable' conduct but clear-minded people are able to recognize it.

Rational habits of thought and behaviour do not come easily to people. To follow a reasoned argument where it leads, to judge according to the evidence, to be prepared to give up cherished ideas when logic or the facts are against us - nobody can achieve these standards all the time. But one can try. This is where the fruits of civilization can help. Science, ethics, philosophy, law and other structures which use reason, have been built up by the collaborative efforts of Mankind and these can give support to the individual in his efforts to be rational. Spreading knowledge of these and how they can help is one of the tasks of the RPA.

Rationalism is for the robust and mature. It not only upsets cherished habits of thought, but challenges the established order of society. We are in the midst of the most remarkable period of transition in the history of the world. It must be clear to everyone that the old order is passing. We can, of course, try to slow down the rate of change or we can try to keep up with it. To be a

Rationalist is to accept the break with ideas and institutions whose only merit is that they served well enought in bygone times.

The conflict today is between those who whole-heartedly accept the modern world and those who hark back to the past. It is good advice for the individual to be his age; but it is just as necessary to keep adjusted to the age in which we live. This is what we mean by *living with reality.*

An obvious kind of makebelieve is religious faith. Nowadays it is showing an unprecedented decline. Blind faith in some dogma, whether religious or political, or in a charismatic leader, is the opposite to rational belief. It is a crutch for the emotionally immature.

## Man on His Own

Are all Rationalists atheists? Some are, and some would call themselves agnostics. Others would say the existence of God is a strictly meaningless question. In the eighteenth century, where modern Rationalism has its roots, Voltaire and Thomas Paine were Deists. Today Deism seems to be as dead as the Dodo. Even within the Christian Church the traditional belief in God has faded like the Cheshire Cat. There is actually a 'Death of God' movement in some theological colleges.

What can be said with confidence is that no Rationalist would look for any supernatural intervention in human affairs. Man is on his own. We have to tackle our problems out of our natural resources.

For example, diseases such as tuberculosis, pneumonia and diphtheria used to kill millions. In many parts of the world malaria, cholera and plague have been reduced if not eliminated. All this progress is due to scientific medicine. But to solve one problem is to create another. The resulting population explosion could mean too many mouths to feed. So death control must be accompanied by birth control if we are to avoid disaster.

## Morals Without Religion

Is morality possible without religion? There is no necessary connection. Some ethical rules based on religion have been actually harmful. The teaching of Hinduism, for example, on caste and the treatment of widows, has caused untold suffering. So has the attitude of many branches of the Christian Church to sex and marriage. The belief that birth control and abortion are contrary to the laws of God has no rational foundation.

There are many different opinions about the basis of morality and Rationalists are not unanimously committed to any particular one. A rational morality judges an act by its consequences: if it seems to promote pleasure and diminish suffering. How to apply this standard in particular cases is for the individual

to decide. There is no answer book. Rationalism puts the responsibility for our actions and beliefs squarely on our shoulders. This means that the only restriction to personal liberty is the right of others to enjoy an equal freedom.

A society of free men and women is impossible without toleration of differences. The life of reason is stifled in a closed society. So, in the long run, are originality and creativity. Without heretics both science and art stagnate.

### According to the Evidence

To the Rationalist, it is second nature to call for the facts before pronouncing on any matter to which the consideration of evidence is relevant. What a difference it would make in daily life if everyone refrained from snap judgements and practised this sort of restraint.

When a scientist is asked for an opinion he first studies the evidence. If it is inadequate he says so frankly and suspends judgement. If he did otherwise he would get very poor results.

It is the same in a court of law. We should not think well of a judge who did not trouble to listen to the evidence and decided in advance that the prisoner was guilty because of some flash of intuition. We could not run society on these lines. We could not even cultivate our own gardens.

Many people have been Rationalists all their lives without knowing it. Many others, however, keep their Rationalism in a separate compartment so that it shall not interfere with the sort of irrational thinking which gives them pleasure. The consequence is a divided mind and no-one can pretend that this is a good state of affairs.

'Those who believe in absurdities will commit atrocities', said Voltaire. He saw it happen, and so have we in our own time. We know from bitter experience that religion is not the only breeding ground of intolerance and cruelty.

### The Relevance of Rationalism Today

How can these values spread? Rationalists believe in the power of ideas. In its seventy-five years of existence the RPA has published millions of books, pamphlets and journals. It made publishing history as a forerunner of the paperback revolution. Many have testified that its famous Thinkers' Library helped to mould the minds of a generation.

Intellectual fashions change but the basic human needs remain the same. 'I am a Rationalist', wrote Professor Sir Karl Popper, 'because I see in the attitude of reasonableness the only alternative to violence. A Rationalist, as I use the word, is a man who attempts to reach decisions by argument and, perhaps, in certain cases, by compromise rather than by violence'.

That is why Rationalism is so relevant today.

If you believe that compromise is a sign of weakness, that it is always better to fight than negotiate, Rationalism is not for you. Similarly, if you are in sympathy with the trendy dislike of science, and crave the excitements of mythology and magic, you will not be interested in the RPA.

Yet there was never a time when the penalties of wishful thinking were so terrible. It is not easy to behave rationally, or even to be sure what this entails in specific circumstances. We need discussion, we need a forum of debate, we need books and periodicals for our minds to be fertilized by the best ideas of our time.

The RPA was formed to satisfy these needs. Its success depends on the support given by those who realise its importance. It is more than a publishing house; it is a fellowship of like minded men and women who understand the dangers of obscurantism and irrationalism in the modern world.

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## To New Members of the RPA

All who join the RPA in response to this Special Enrolment Offer and subscribe £2.00 will receive post free:

*NEW HUMANIST* monthly for one year from the date of joining.

*QUESTION 8* published in January 1975.

*PLUS* free copies of the following books: *Computers, Science and Society* by F H George, *Question 7* edited by Hector Hawton and *Humanist Anthology* compiled by Margaret Knight.

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**APPLICATION FORM**

To the Secretary, RPA Ltd, 88 Islington High Street, London N1 8EW

I wish to apply for membership of the Rationalist Press Association. I am in agreement with the objects of the RPA and wish to become a member. I undertake to be bound by the terms of the Memorandum and Articles of Association. I am over eighteen.

Please send me NEW HUMANIST monthly for one year, the forthcoming issue of QUESTION, and my complimentary copies of *Computers, Science and Society, Humanist Anthology* and *Question 7.*

I enclose cheque/P.O. for £2.00

NAME (Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms) .....(BLOCK LETTERS PLEASE)

ADDRESS .....

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SIGNATURE ..... DATE .....

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